Reforming the candidate nomination process, much less any issue that has to do with democratic reform, is not usually a top priority of either voters or politicians. However, the way in which political parties choose their candidates in Canada is something that is poorly understood by the vast majority of the general public. Considering that, I will take this opportunity to explain exactly what is wrong with candidate nominations and how they can be improved.

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What prompted you to take this issue seriously?

The problems with the candidate nomination process largely flew under the radar for me and many others until several bizarre events occurred during nomination races over the past few months. In May, National Post Columnist Sabrina Maddeaux suspended her campaign for the Conservative Party nomination in the Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill riding, alleging that senior party officials rigged the race to favour former MP Costas Menegakis. Just over two months prior to this, human rights activist Kaveh Shahrooz dropped out of contention for the

Conservative nomination in the Richmond Hill riding amid a backdrop of possible foreign interference by the Iranian regime. And most recently, journalist Wyatt Claypool and former UCP cabinet minister Leela Aheer were both disqualified from running in the Calgary Signal Hill Conservative nomination, with Claypool alleging that party insiders favoured former UCP cabinet minister Jeremy Nixon.

Lest you think that these problems are merely contained to the Conservative Party, there are many examples of these sorts of shenanigans in Liberal nomination races as well. Most infamously, Liberal MP Han Dong was allegedly aided by the CCP during his nomination race in 2019, which included busing international students into his riding to vote for him. Even the Liberal nomination for the LaSalle-Emard-Verdun by-election was shuttered so Montreal city councillor Laura Palestini could be parachuted into the riding.

All of this is what led beloved (at least outside of Quebec) Canadian commentator JJ McCullough to describe the nomination process as

"straight out of Gangs of New York". So clearly something needs to change. But what?

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Breaking down the problem

Before I offer any specific solutions, I think it would be useful to separate the issues plaguing nominations into three categories:

1. Favouritism for establishment candidates
   Political parties often have a vested interest in making sure that certain candidates win nomination races. These preferred candidates are often politicians from another level of government (such as the aforementioned Jeremy Nixon) or party insiders. Sometimes these candidates are directly appointed (40% of nomination candidates between 2004 and 2015 were) or the rules of their nomination races are slanted to benefit them.
2. Foreign Interference
   Foreign governments, such as Iran or China, will aid candidates who, inadvertently or not, further their geostrategic interests

(such as Han Dong). Meanwhile, candidates that take strong stances against such governments (such as Kaveh Shahrooz) will be punished in favour of more compliant competitors.

3. Capture by special interests
   Highly organized diaspora communities can show up in large numbers to vote as a block for their preferred candidates. Although this is a more grassroots approach than some of the favouritism previously described, it can at best produce candidates that are narrowly devoted to a cause that is otherwise unimportant or unpopular with most voters. At its worst, it can jeopradize relationships with critical allies and undermine national security.

The end result of all three of these issues is that they produce MPs that are unrepresentative of the preferences of the average Canadian. This can only lead to increased levels of discontentment with politicians and the political system writ large.

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Potential Solutions

The simplest and most effective way to solve this problem would be to put Elections Canada in charge of crafting rules for nomination races.

This would help usher in a standardized set of rules all political parties must adhere to, eliminating the possibility that the rules might be bent to favour a particular candidate. Any shenanigans that occur within a nomination race would also have a much higher chance of being investigated.

Although oversight by Elections Canada might solve the issues of favouritism and foreign interference, it could not prevent the mobilizing of niche special interest of diaspora groups during these races. This is why I propose that we move towards an American-style primary system, where candidates are chosen in elections open to the general public, as opposed to just fee-paying party members. Doing this will ensure that the common people can finally assert themselves and triumph over niche interests, foreign governments, and party insiders in this critical aspect of our democracy.